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The cooperative 5-year experimental program in adult reading reported in this article was conducted jointly by the Brooklyn Public Library and Brooklyn College. The article explains the organization of the program, its psychological testing procedures, and program techniques. Eight major findings are presented and 12 specific suggestions for those planning a similar reading improvement program.

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Adult Reading Improvement: A Five-Year Report

by Max Siegel

ED000817

THE REPORT which follows is the summary of a five-year experimental program of reading improvement for adults conducted jointly by the Brooklyn Public Library and Brooklyn College during the period September 1955 through June 1960.* The project was financed by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation.

Background

Twenty years ago, a review of the reading research during the 1930's by Arthur Traxler indicated an outstanding trend in the direction of helping students beyond the elementary school to improve their reading skill, and also of trying a wide variety of procedures and courageously appraising the results (*4*). During the subsequent decade, interest in reading at the high school level increased considerably, with the literature indicating a lag in interest and research involving college and adult populations. Surveys of the literature suggest that the largest number of studies to date of reading programs at adult levels have been done during the 1950's (*1, 3, 5, 6*).

The Brooklyn Reading Improvement Program was designed to discover whether a free program to improve the reading ability of adults might be effectively carried on in a library setting with the collaboration of a local college. As a pilot study, this project had the goal of demonstrating the possibility that libraries throughout the country might initiate reading improvement programs with college or university assistance. A related long-range goal involved the possible development of a manual or guide that could assist libraries to establish such programs independently in areas in which a college was either unavailable or inaccessible.

Implicit in the over-all investigation were such immediate questions as: how many and what kind of people would present themselves as students; what would be the reading needs of the applying population; what kinds of programs would best meet these needs; what would be the reading progress picture; how the students would evaluate such courses after completion; how permanent would be the gains made by students; what would be the unique contributions of the library physical setting to the total program, both for librarians and for people with educational background in reading improvement but no experience; what experience would provide the best background for instructors; what kinds of machines, if any, or other materials, would be necessary; what types of groups could be helped, and with what methods.

*The general leadership, cooperation, creativity, and unfailing understanding of Mr. Francis R. St. John, Chief Librarian of the Brooklyn Public Library, is acknowledged with grateful appreciation.

Organization of the Program

During the first three years, hereinafter referred to as Phase A, it was planned that Brooklyn College would exercise primary professional responsibility for the administration of the total program, including the training and supervision of all staff. During the last two years, Phase B, it was planned that the library would administer the program, under the immediate direction of a library staff member trained by college supervisory staff during the first three years.

Plans for the first three years included the establishment of a Reader's Advisory Service as an integral part of all reading improvement courses. The librarian assigned to the program was charged with responsibility for this service, as well as for continuation of the total program during the two last years of the project.

Both the college and the library made staff assignments. The college staff included people with training and experience in clinical psychology and the language arts, specifically in the diagnosis and treatment of reading disabilities, and in administration. In the initial organization of the program, senior professional and administrative staff members and unit heads of a college remedial reading service to the community collaborated.

The operating professional staff at the library was headed by a full-time reading clinician with training and experience in clinical psychology and remedial reading. In addition, there were two half-time junior reading clinicians with graduate training in clinical psychology and remedial reading, but with no experience. A clinical psychologist from the college was assigned to the reading improvement program on a one-third time basis; he was responsible for the testing and evaluation of applicants to the program and he was also consulted about the emotional problems of applicants.

The librarian charged with responsibility for the Readers' Advisory Service worked closely with the professional staff. Under the supervision of the senior reading clinician, the readers' advisor received training and experience as a reading teacher. During the second half of the three-year period this library worker filled the dual role of reading teacher and readers' advisor.

During the last two years of the project the college faculty member who had exercised professional and administrative coordination for the first three years maintained liaison with the chief librarian and the library staff.

At the library central office the operating staff consisted of the full-time librarian who had been trained during Phase A, one half-time library trainee instructor, and one full-time clerk-receptionist. These workers conducted the program during Phase B with the benefit of the experience and training obtained during Phase A. In addition, six librarians in the branch libraries conducted reading improvement groups without specific training or prior experience in reading improvement.

Psychological testing. In order to obtain objective data regarding the intelligence, reading ability and personality of applicants, a battery of psychological tests was organized.* By testing before and after the actual reading improvement work it was hypothesized that evaluations of progress could be made more systematically. It was also expected that test information would be of use in the structuring of reading improvement groups.

It was recognized that standardized group tests requiring the ability to read possess manifest limitations for the evaluation of intelligence as well as of reading ability. Experience and the literature, however, indicated that with large numbers such group instruments were satisfactory for general screening and classification purposes. Since specific provision was made for the use of individual and projective tests as necessary, it was considered that an essentially sound testing program had been developed for both phases of the program.

Grouping procedures. Experience at Brooklyn College in providing remedial reading services to children in the community during the eight years preceding the initiation of the present project strongly suggested that a group reading improvement program would be most likely to produce the results envisioned. Individual work is so costly in terms of personnel time that it would limit seriously the number of individuals who could be served and, therefore, the data that could be reported. The literature, in addition, supports the conclusion that group work by its very nature offers certain specific advantages. There could be interaction and a supportive feeling that others were in the same predicament or feeling similar needs.

On the basis of previous experience it was decided to establish the initial size of groups at approximately six to ten. On the same basis, it was planned to have groups meet twice weekly for one and one-half hours each time, over a two-month period, for a total of sixteen group sessions and twenty-four hours. The initial goal was to group students according to their reading needs and their educational backgrounds, as far as possible, so as to achieve some degree of homogeneity. Later in the program, heterogeneous groups were organized.

In general, homogeneous groups were based upon level of educational background and reading test scores in vocabulary, rate, and comprehension. Personality factors were evaluated wherever practicable. These considerations provided for wide latitude and variety in groups. Thus, there might be groups of college graduates high in vocabulary, low in comprehension, and average in speed or rate of reading. On all educational levels there were possibilities for wide variability in the groups.

Heterogeneous groups were formed on a random basis, in order of application, regardless of education, abilities, or personality factors. In such

*Space does not permit inclusion of details regarding test instruments, as well as other material extensively covered in the full report of the Reading Improvement Program, available without charge at the Brooklyn Public Library, Brooklyn 10, N. Y.

groups, college graduates might be working with adults who had only eighth-grade backgrounds.

The program was initiated with homogeneous groups of six to ten, meeting twice weekly, one and a half hours each session for two months. It soon became apparent that absenteeism and drop-outs were real problems, necessitating all possible efforts to maintain interest and motivation. Groups were therefore increased in size to approximately fifteen (and up to eighteen) in order to end with ten. Similarly, a two-week waiting period between groups seemed to be causing some withdrawals, so the program was modified during the third year to include the same twenty-four hours distributed over six weeks, with groups meeting for twelve two-hour sessions.

Some brief descriptions of representative groups at different points in Phase A follow, from among the seventy groups completed:

Group 3. All students with some college education; reading comprehension above average; speed of reading below average to average.

Group 5A. Elementary to high school graduate education; severe reading disabilities, ranging from non-reader to third grade level.

Group 32. All high school graduates; comprehension above average; speed low.

Group 33. Limited to little educational background; mentally retarded, with I.Q.'s 59 to 71; reading levels from non-reader to upper second grade; excellent social competence.

Group 41. College graduates and undergraduates; intellectually gifted; comprehension high, speed low.

Phase B

During the last two years, most of the groups taught were heterogeneous in educational backgrounds and reading levels. On the basis of experience acquired during the first three years, the librarian in charge was able to initiate administrative changes in grouping procedure which reduced waiting lists, time lags, and withdrawals from the program. This was accomplished largely by the introduction of once weekly three-hour Saturday afternoon groups, for which there had been considerable demand, by organizing new groups before current ones had ended, and by keeping all groups in Phase B on a six-week schedule, with groups meeting for two-hour sessions twice weekly. As a result, seventy-five groups were handled during the last two years, as contrasted with seventy during the three years of Phase A.

The first year of Phase B, or the fourth year of the program, involved a transition period from college to library administration, with librarians trained in Phase A conducting all groups. The librarian who had been trained during Phase A and who was continued in charge of the operating staff during Phase B was able to conduct thirty-eight groups during the last two years. Library trainees taught twenty-five groups, with training and supervision by the librarian in charge. Librarians in three branch libraries taught twelve groups during the fifth

and final year of the project. Three of the librarians had no training whatsoever, except for instruction in the use of machines and the opportunity to read the report summarizing Phase A. These librarians conducted six groups. The other three "untrained" librarians, who taught six groups, were provided with a Manual prepared by the full-time librarian and readers' advisor (2).

Group Program Techniques

In general, the program was characterized by an orderly and systematic introduction of materials, according to knowledge of the group members on the part of the teachers. Students first expressed their interests, exchanged ideas, and revealed their reading problems. The importance of the clinician in helping the group to interact, to establish rapport and become comfortable in this new and even threatening situation cannot be exaggerated. Efforts by the clinician were guided by many considerations. At all times it was necessary to stimulate interest, despite the obvious fact that this was a program to which adults had turned voluntarily. Toward this end, group discussion techniques were employed around any subject conceivably related to the world of reading. The theater, best-selling novels, classics, reading interests and attitudes, and every possible hobby, vocational or avocational pursuit became legitimate discussion areas.

Various techniques were employed in teaching word recognition skills, when indicated: building a sight vocabulary, using phonetic, contextual, visual and kinesthetic methods, and a combination of any or all of these. In many cases there was a manifest need to develop a meaning vocabulary through use of the dictionary, direct study of words, and both oral and silent practice. Techniques for the improvement of comprehension included immediate and delayed recall, the use of sensory impressions, application of central themes and relationships, cause and effect, and independent evaluations. Class discussions were held on vocabulary improvement, study habits, paragraph structure, and related subjects.

Newspapers, magazines, playbills, and endless reading matter encountered by group members in day-to-day living were utilized in both phases of the program.

Remedial groups used workbooks for help with word recognition, pronunciation, vowel and consonant blending, and vocabulary building. Books for stimulating easy reading were used freely, as well as simple dictionaries, booklets, and brief articles. Of the available mechanical instruments, flash-type machines (e.g., the tachistoscope), reading rate controllers (e.g., the EDL-Controlled Reader, the SRA Reading Accelerator), and tape recorders (including the McGraw-Hill Language Master) were used most frequently with the very retarded readers.

With most of the people in this program, study exercises, workbooks employing practice in improving speed of comprehension, and dic-

THE POPULATION

	Phase A	*Phase B*	*Total*
No. of Queries	2929	1033	3962
No. of Applications	1789	708	2497
Per Cent of Queries Applying	61.0	68.5	63.0
No. Completing	604	593	1197
Per Cent of Applicants Completing	33.8	83.8	47.9
Per Cent of Queries Completing	20.6	57.4	30.3
No. of Groups Completing	70	75	145
Mean Group Size	8.6	7.9	8.2
Reader's Advisory Interviews	1996	279	2275

tionaries were the most used tools. Some groups used no machines, and others one or another alone or in combination as part of the experimental design of the program.

Reader's Advisory Service

When the reading improvement program was started in 1955 a reader's advisor was assigned from the library staff to aid and guide the students' outside reading according to specific needs and interests. The aid was to be given through weekly half-hour interviews with each student.

In general, the advisory service was well received. In the five years of operation (from October 1955 through May 1960), there were 2,275 advisory interviews with individuals from the various groups. In these interviews 2,801 books were accepted for outside reading. During Phase B, when efforts were concentrated along these lines, 164 book discussions were held with 75 groups.

Major Findings

1. Almost four thousand individuals inquired about the program, and almost twenty-five hundred, or 63 per cent, submitted applications. Almost twelve hundred individuals completed their courses, representing nearly half of the applying population. While no statistics were maintained initially for those who began the courses but did not complete them, it appears that those completing the courses represented approximately 70 per cent of those who began. A total of 145 groups completed the twenty-four-hour course, with an average of 8.2 persons in each group (based on completions only).*

2. The population applying for and entering the reading improvement program represented largely professional and clerical workers of a higher than average educational and intellectual level.

3. The principal motivations for entering the program appeared to be a general desire for better understanding of books and for an increased rate of reading.

4. Significant gains in reading

*Evaluation of all data was carried on by Professor Louis M. Heil, Director of the Brooklyn College Office of Testing and Research.

comprehension (high and low level) and/or reading speed were found for most groups of students participating in the program.

5. The greatest gains in reading achievement appear to be associated with a relatively high level of intelligence and age, the brighter and younger students making the greater gains.

6. Gain in reading achievement, although appearing to be dependent upon the time of the class, the greater achievement occurring for the evening classes, really depends upon the student motivation.

7. Gain in reading achievement does *not* appear to depend upon such factors as:

Educational level of the student
Time removed from formal education
Sex of student (when age and intelligence are taken into account)
Homogeneous vs. heterogeneous grouping
Mechanical aids employed, or whether any are employed
Amount of training of librarian who is teaching the reading improvement
Instruction by clinician or librarian
Student personality adjustment

8. Gains in reading comprehension and speed are retained after a six-month interval following the end of the course, with continued improvement noted.

Some Specific Suggestions

For colleagues planning a reading improvement program with adults the following specific suggestions are offered:

1. In organizing groups, some heterogeneity is satisfactory, but reading levels should be kept as close as possible.

2. Size of groups should be approximately eight to ten by the end of the program; in view of the drop-out problem, fifteen might be a good initial group.

3. Librarians should offer reader's advisory services to members of their own reading improvement groups.

4. Severely retarded readers (at elementary school levels) require programs of one year or more and should not be admitted if such a time period is not available.

5. A new instructor should begin with as homogeneous a group as possible, for his own comfort, and if possible a group which is already above average in reading ability.

6. The program should be taught in a secluded, quiet part of the library.

7. While machines are not necessary, they might well be included as motivating devices.

8. If a selection process must be employed, brighter and relatively younger applicants should be selected. Without testing, there are many indices of brightness (education, occupation, vocabulary, achievements, honors, etc.).

9. In all programs, eye examinations should be recommended to students at the earliest opportunity. When a library is functioning independently, all psychological testing should be avoided and referrals should be made to appropriate agencies.

10. Use book discussion groups and tours of the library as a part of the program.

11. Above all, bear in mind that there is room for improvement in everybody's reading, without exception.

12. Thought might be given to establishing a nominal fee for the program—low enough to preclude no one, yet enough so that the individual has a slight stake in his own progress.

(*Max Siegel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Personnel Service at Brooklyn College. He is at present on sabbatical leave, doing research in connection with a book on group psychotherapy with college students. In addition to counseling, his college duties include teaching in psychology and education. He is a Past-President of the New York State Psychological Association.*)

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